

Clear thinking

Mixing miles of beaches with dining and cultural hotspots, St Pete-Clearwater is the Sunshine State's most underrated destination, finds **India-Jayne Trainor**

The Florida sun glints across the water, reflecting off the gentle waves surrounding our boat.

A shout from the top deck draws our attention to the right, just in time to see a dark fin slice through the surface. Moments later, five dolphins and their calves are gliding through the water, about 20 metres away.

The close encounter is just one of the highlights of a fam trip to St Pete-Clearwater (the combined name for the cities of St Petersburg and Clearwater), two neighbouring destinations on Florida's ➤

Clearwater Beach

PICTURE: Visit St Pete/Clearwater

DESTINATIONS

THE US | FLORIDA

AGENTS' *views*



"There were so many fun experiences. The dolphin adventure

was great and we had a lovely beach afternoon in Clearwater. Even if it rains, you can still go to the beach because it's so warm. There are hotels to suit everyone, from more local stays to bigger resorts. I think once clients have been once, they'll want to return time after time."

Lauren Jackson-Heath,
Independent Travel Experts



"St Pete-Clearwater is not somewhere I would have considered

before this trip. My favourite part was Clearwater Marine Aquarium; seeing dolphins being rehabilitated was a once-in-a-lifetime moment. Both cities have their own appeal: St Pete is more laid-back, while Clearwater is livelier in the evenings. The Chihuly Collection and The Dalí Museum are great for temperamental weather."

Philippa Geary, Hays Travel



"The dolphin-watching cruise was a highlight. I knew it was a beach

destination, but I didn't realise how nice the beaches were. And I didn't know downtown St Pete was going to have such a quirky and artsy vibe. It's a versatile destination."

Ben Walton-Guest,
Travel Counsellors



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The Salvador Dalí Museum; the agents at Pier Teaki; dolphin cruise in Clearwater harbour

PICTURES: Jimmy Fashner; Nicholas A Collura-Gehrt



Gulf Coast, just 30 minutes from Tampa. They lure visitors with 35 miles of white sand, vibrant museums, fresh seafood and 361 days of sunshine per year – and I'm here with a group of UK agents to find out more.

SUMMER IN THE CITY

Our introduction to the area is firmly on land, with a dose of culture at the Salvador Dalí Museum in St Pete. The Spanish artist's surrealism is evident before we even step inside, with a 23-metre-tall glass structure known as The Enigma that envelops the building. Inside, a spiral staircase winds skyward past galleries of the artist's work. We explore rooms of optical illusions, from melting clocks to paintings that pop out from walls, as well as galleries filled with Dalí's sketches, sculptures and prints.

The visit sets the creative juices flowing for our next stop, the Chihuly Collection at the Morean Art Centre, which is home to artist Dale Chihuly's dazzling glass sculptures. In the huge gallery, strategically placed spotlights bring each piece to life. One is a cascade of blue glass twisting like an upside-down Christmas tree, another a constellation of marbled orbs, while a third resembles a cluster of rippling, multicoloured clams.

After picking up a few glass souvenirs, we are back outside admiring even more art – this time, the 600-plus murals that adorn the city's streets – on the way to St Pete Pier. Opened just five years ago, the peaceful boardwalk is full of locals jogging, rollerblading or

"We explore rooms of optical illusions, from melting clocks to paintings that pop out from walls

riding the shuttle buggy to our destination, Pier Teaki, a restaurant and rooftop bar at the end of the pier, where visitors can enjoy panoramic views over the city and sea.

DOLPHIN SAIL

A 45-minute drive north brings us to Clearwater, which is hugged by endless white sand and transparent water that reflects its name. At the beachfront city's marina, we board a two-deck boat for a Dolphin Exploration Tour in Clearwater harbour.

Anticipation among the agents is high, as the excursion operator Tropics Boat Tours offers a 100% guarantee of seeing dolphins. As we enjoy chilled drinks with the sea breeze in our hair, we scan the waves with bated breath. Sure enough, we soon spot one playing in the surf near Pier 60, followed by a braver dolphin cruising gracefully in the wake of our boat. All in, we spy multiple pods of the mammals and their calves bobbing in and out of the waves.

We learn more about the animals during a brief stop at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium rescue ➤

WHAT'S
new

ST PETE-CLEARWATER

🌟 **Opal Sol Hotel** opened in February on Clearwater Beach, featuring a luxury spa, 10 restaurants, three pools and direct beach access.



🌟 Historic hotel **The Vinoy** is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year and has completed the first phase of a renovation with the opening of Elliott Aster restaurant, led by award-winning chef Lee Wolen.



🌟 St Pete-Clearwater was officially added to the official **Michelin Guide** earlier this year. There are numerous new restaurants, from Sparrow (pictured), a seasonal spot atop the Moxy hotel, to Pulpo Kitchen, which serves Peruvian-inspired dishes.



PICTURES: Henry Amistadi; Jimmy Fashner



ABOVE: Aerial view of downtown St Pete at sunset

and rehabilitation centre. Peering into the expansive complex, we witness four rare rough-toothed dolphins getting acclimatised to their new home, after they were rescued from stranding and deemed unfit to be released into the wild. One by one, they are lowered into the water, leaving many onlookers visibly moved as the dolphins begin playing, getting used to the safety of their new environment.

Still skirting the coast, we spend the next few hours strolling the Scottish-influenced city of Dunedin. It feels quaint and quiet, its Main Street lined with heritage buildings that house local boutiques, cafes and a selection of breweries, including Dunedin Brewery, the oldest microbrewery in Florida. Great dining is Dunedin's biggest draw – we enjoy an authentic Mexican lunch at Casa Tina, stop for waterfront drinks at Olde Bay Cafe and gorge ourselves on ice cream in dozens of flavours at Strachan's Ice Cream Parlour.

LIFE'S A BEACH

Despite St Pete-Clearwater's reputation for sunshine (almost) every day, a light drizzle scuppers our VIP Beach Experience at the Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach hotel. We were ready to check out the cabana beds, snacks and drinks set up on the sands of Clearwater Beach – but being British, and undeterred by the inclement weather, we dive straight into the sea anyway. The waters of the Gulf of Mexico are tropically warm, and the sun even peeks through the clouds,

“Many onlookers are visibly moved as the dolphins begin playing, getting used to the safety of their new environment

allowing us to while away an afternoon swimming, chatting and people-watching.

Our final Florida dinner is at Columbia Restaurant, just along the coast in Sand Key. It's a family-run spot dating back more than a century. Despite being able to accommodate up to 1,700 diners, soon after we arrive, the tables are full and the restaurant abuzz with chatter as a burnt-orange sun sets outside. It's a fitting end to our visit, encapsulating the great food, fair weather and laid-back, coastal charm that defines this lesser-known Florida destination. **TV**

BOOK IT

Ocean Florida offers seven nights in St Pete-Clearwater from £1,279 per person, based on four sharing during a May departure. The price includes flights from Heathrow to Tampa with Virgin Atlantic and room-only accommodation at the Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach. ocean-florida.co.uk